



**Directorate of  
Intelligence**

**Secret**



25

# **Nicaragua: Repression of the Miskito Indians (U)**

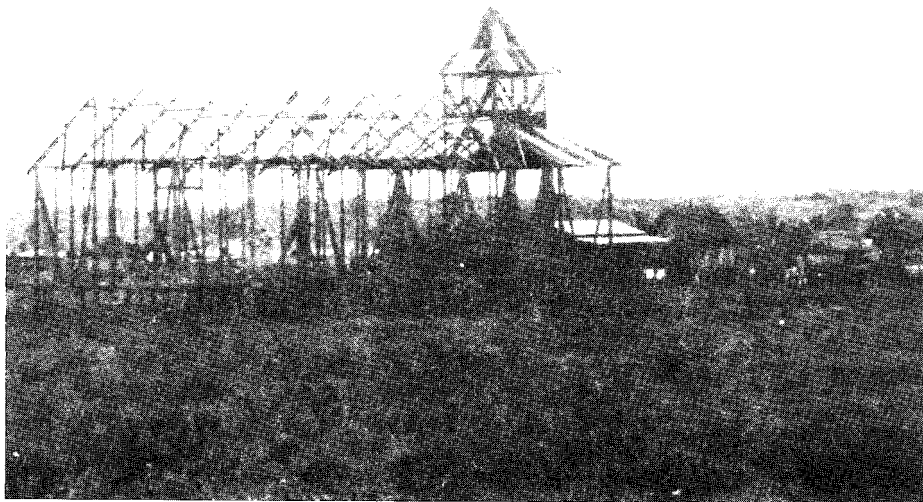
**An Intelligence Assessment**

**Secret**

*GI 82-10056  
March 1982*

*Copy 250*

5. Church under construction at the Mocomon refugee camp. February 1982 (U)



6. Typical thatch-roofed huts of the Miskito refugees at Mocomon. February 1982 (U)



**Page Denied**

3. The UN refugee camp at Mocoron, Honduras, for Miskitos from Nicaragua. February 1982 (U)



Liaison ©

4. Miskito refugees at Mocoron. February 1982 (U)



Liaison ©



Directorate of  
Intelligence

Secret



25

# Nicaragua: Repression of the Miskito Indians (U)

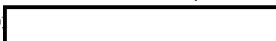
## An Intelligence Assessment

*Information available as of 12 March 1982  
has been used in the preparation of this report.*

This paper was prepared by



Office of Global Issues. Comments and queries are  
welcome and may be directed to the Chief, Africa-Latin  
America Branch, OGI, o



This paper has been coordinated with the National  
Intelligence Officer for Latin America and with the  
Office of African and Latin American Analysis. (U)

Secret

GI 82-10056  
March 1982

**Page Denied**

## Nicaragua: Repression of the Miskito Indians (U

Over the past few months the Government of Nicaragua has carried out a harsh and systematic crackdown against the Miskito Indians of the remote east coast department of Zelaya. Government troops have completely destroyed many villages and have moved entire populations from their homes along the Honduran frontier to interior detention camps. A series of violent border incidents and continued Miskito resistance to the efforts of the Sandinistas to integrate the long-neglected region with the rest of the country have led to the current repression. [REDACTED]

The compelling motive behind the uprooting of the Miskitos is the determination to secure the border zone from Honduras-based anti-Sandinistas by removing their potential supporters. At least 10,000 of an estimated 55,000 Nicaraguan Miskitos have fled to Honduras, where they now reside in UN camps or with their 25,000 Honduran kinsmen. Government claims that the current actions are part of a long-term plan to improve the living conditions of the Miskitos and protect them from "counterrevolutionaries" seem ludicrous in light of eyewitness accounts of the brutal manner in which the removal operations have been conducted. [REDACTED]

### Who Are the Miskitos?

The Miskitos are believed to have migrated to their present habitat on the east coast of Central America well before European exploration of the Caribbean. Their origin is unclear, but linguistic similarities with the Chibcha Indians of Colombia point to a South American derivation. The group now termed Miskito includes a large admixture of peoples of African ancestry—descendants of Jamaican blacks and of escaped slaves of earlier times who intermarried with the Indians. Besides the Miskito language, many also speak English and Spanish. In contrast to the vast majority of the Nicaraguan population, which is Roman Catholic, the Miskitos are mostly Protestants; Moravians comprise their principal denomination. [REDACTED]

The Miskitos pursue a life of hunting, fishing, and subsistence farming; some also are employed as wage

laborers in the forestry and mining industries. Expert boatsmen, much of their existence has traditionally been spent on and around water—either the ocean, where they capture sea turtles, or rivers such as the Coco, where they navigate their long dugout canoes, the only practical means of transportation in a forested, almost roadless land. [REDACTED]

### Where Are They?

The Miskitos have given their name to the whole stretch of Caribbean coast from Honduras's Gracias a Dios Department southward through Nicaragua to the border with Costa Rica. By far the largest portion of this coast falls within the Zelaya Department of eastern Nicaragua, and it is there that most of the Miskitos live. Zelaya, together with part of Rio San Juan Department to the south, forms what Nicaraguans call their Atlantic Region—a vast territory that has always been physically and culturally distinct from the rest of the country. While accounting for half of Nicaragua's area, the region holds less than 8 percent of its population (see chart). [REDACTED]

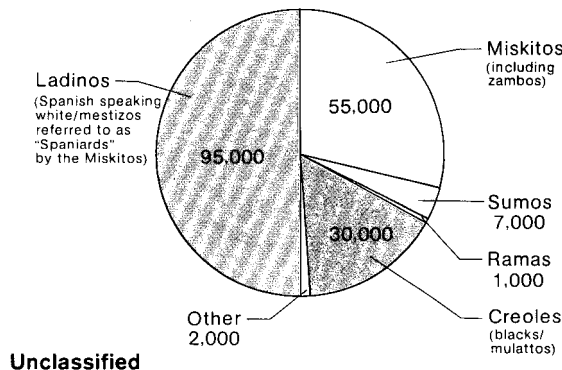
The Nicaraguan Miskitos have, until recently, been concentrated along the middle and lower Rio Coco, which forms the border with Honduras, and along the coast from just south of Cape Gracias a Dios to Pearl Lagoon, about 30 miles north of Bluefields (see map). Traditionally, the Miskitos have lived in small villages but have frequented market towns such as Puerto Cabezas on the coast, Bilwaskarma, Waspam, Leimus, and San Carlos on the Rio Coco, and Bonanza and Siuna in a mining area of the interior. [REDACTED]

### How Many Are There?

Our estimate of 55,000 Miskitos in Nicaragua (before the recent exodus to Honduras) and 25,000 in Honduras is based on extrapolations from academic studies done in the 1970s, on US Bureau of the Census projections for the Department of Zelaya. [REDACTED] Precise figures are impossible to give because of the lack of accurate census data and the varying interpretations of what

constitutes a Miskito. The term is sometimes used only for persons of obviously Amerindian racial origin who speak the Miskito language and adhere to a typical Miskito lifestyle. At the other extreme it is sometimes used to include *zambos* (mixed Indians and blacks) and even members of the other small east coast Indian groups, the Sumos and Ramas. [REDACTED]

#### Estimated Ethnic Composition of Zelaya Department



#### What Has Happened to Them?

Before the Sandinista revolution of July 1979, most Nicaraguan central governments paid scant attention to the Atlantic Region. Except during periods of estrangement between Nicaragua and Honduras, the Miskito Indians were free to pass back and forth across the Rio Coco with little regard for its function as an international boundary; some even lived on one side of the river and cultivated fields on the other. By and large, the Miskitos were content to be left alone by the government. Social services, health care, and education were left largely to missionaries—particularly Moravians. [REDACTED]

Sandinista determination to integrate the east coast with the rest of the country for military security reasons and to "Nicaraguanize" all of its inhabitants was met with opposition from the outset. The introduction of large numbers of Cuban teachers, medical

personnel, and construction workers was especially resented. Violence first erupted in Bluefields, a largely non-Miskito settlement, in September 1980. February of the following year brought renewed violence, this time in Puerto Cabezas, an important market town in a predominantly Miskito area. Shortly thereafter Steadman Fagoth, a charismatic leader of the Miskitos, was arrested. He was head of the Misurasata (acronym for Miskito, Sumo, Rama, Sandinista) Unity, an organization that had been created by the Sandinistas to gain control of the east coast Indian groups but which, under Fagoth, would not cooperate. Fagoth was released in mid-April 1981 (after agreeing to accept a sabbatical to study in Eastern Europe) and managed to escape into Honduras, where he strongly denounced Sandinista repression. He had already been preceded in his flight by some 3,000 Miskitos. [REDACTED]

By late 1981 the focus of recurring border incidents between Sandinistas and Honduran-based anti-Sandinistas had shifted from the western highlands to the lower Rio Coco. In December the Nicaraguan Government banned all media reporting from the Atlantic Region and seized a popular radio station. On 7 January 1982 travel in the region was restricted, and within a few days a large-scale roundup of the Miskitos and the destruction of their villages commenced. Initially [REDACTED]

these activities involved a string of settlements on the Rio Coco between Waspam and Raiti [REDACTED]

[REDACTED] Later, settlements downriver on the Coco were razed and attacks may have been carried out against places on the coast in the vicinity of Sandy Bay, Prinzapolka, and the Rio Kukalaya [REDACTED]

[REDACTED] This activity stimulated a new exodus of Miskito refugees to Honduras—swelling the ranks of Nicaraguan Indian refugees there to about 10,000. [REDACTED]

Many of the Nicaraguan Indians who fled into Honduras, including the Miskitos and small numbers of Sumos and Ramas, are now located in camps sponsored by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) at Mocoron about 30 kilometers



from the border in Gracias a Dios Department (see photos 3, 4, 5, and 6). The UNHCR, at the request of the Honduran Government, initiated an assistance project for this refugee group on 1 June 1981. Camps were set up and projects leading toward immediate self-support were developed. In December 1981 there were approximately 200 refugees under the assistance of the UNHCR camps, by late January 1982 there were about 2,000, and by late February the number had risen to about 4,800. The other Nicaraguan Miskitos in Honduras are either receiving aid from their Honduran kinsmen or fending for themselves [redacted]

According to a Nicaraguan Miskito who recently crossed into Honduras, there are five main detention camps in Zelaya in the general vicinity of the Rosita mining operation. [redacted]

[redacted] The detention centers are little more than tent camps with only primitive support facilities. There have been conflicting reports about whether they are surrounded by barbed wire fences, but no question at all that the Indians are not free to leave. [redacted]

The Nicaraguan Government has described its actions as part of a long-term plan to improve the living conditions of the Miskitos and to protect them from "counterrevolutionaries." According to the Sandinistas a total of 8,500 Miskitos were removed from 24 villages along the Rio Coco in mid-February for placement in new "settlements." The status of other Miskitos in Nicaragua, numbering about 36,500, is unclear at this time. No villages other than those along the Rio Coco are known to have been destroyed. [redacted]

### Significance of the Repression

Removal of the Miskitos from the Rio Coco and the complete obliteration of many of their villages indicate the top priority that the Nicaraguan Government gives to military security matters. Its capacity to control the whole eastern section of the border and to

prevent the infiltration of anti-Sandinistas from Honduras has been enhanced by these actions—at least for the short term. Protection of Puerto Cabezas is obviously a major concern for the Sandinistas. The port serves as a principal entry point for military equipment and supplies shipped up the coast from Bluefields; the airfield, currently being enlarged, is among the three best in the country and will soon be capable of handling advanced Soviet combat aircraft. [redacted]

The brutal manner in which these security operations were carried out has provoked a strong negative reaction even in many quarters that have been sympathetic to the Sandinista cause. In a document signed on 18 February by Archbishop Obando y Bravo and all the bishops in Nicaragua, the Catholic Church vigorously denounced the mistreatment of Miskito Indians and other inhabitants of the eastern part of the country. The document notes particularly the forced displacement of Indians from their villages along the Rio Coco. This is by far the strongest antigovernment communique the Episcopal Conference has issued since the Sandinistas took power. From the Sandinista point of view, the statement could not have come at a worse time. It was published on the opening day of the Permanent Conference of Latin American Political Parties, meeting in Managua and attended by many of the region's prominent socialist leaders. The European press also reacted negatively to the relocation of Miskitos, calling it a deportation and referring to their new homes as "camps" rather than "settlements." [redacted]

The Sandinistas have, on balance, probably lost by their callous treatment of the Miskitos. Accounts—now being given by refugees at Mocoron—of murder, forced marches, burned homes, and desecrated churches have stiffened the resolve of those elements already opposed to the Sandinista regime and perhaps converted some of the government's erstwhile friends into enemies. The Sandinistas have further alienated the inhabitants of the remote Atlantic Region, which they are trying so hard to integrate with the rest of Nicaragua [redacted]

This map illustrates the political and geographical landscape of Central America, specifically focusing on Honduras, Nicaragua, and Costa Rica. The map shows the following details:

- Geography:** Major rivers such as the Rio Patuca, Rio Guayape, Rio Coco, Rio Wawa, Rio Choluteca, Rio Tuma, Rio Blanco, Rio Grande de Matagalpa, Rio Muc, Rio Indio, and Rio Chiriqué are depicted. Key geographical features include Sandy Bay, Cayos Miskitos, Puerto Cabezas, and Corn Island.
- Political Boundaries:** The borders of Honduras, Nicaragua, and Costa Rica are clearly marked. Internal department boundaries in Nicaragua are also shown.
- Urban Centers:** Major cities and towns are labeled, including Tegucigalpa, Danlí, Choluteca, Esteli, Jinotega, Matagalpa, Boaco, Juigalpa, Granada, Managua, Masachapa, Jinotepe, Rivas, San Juan del Sur, Tamarindo, San Carlos, Rama, Bluefields, Colonia Nueva Guinea, San Juan del Norte, Puerto Viejo, Las Cañas, and Toluca.
- Special Features:** An inset map in the top left corner shows the location of the main map area within Central America. A legend in the bottom left corner defines symbols for the area inhabited by Miskito Indians (hatched pattern), detention centers (triangle with a dot), department capitals (circle with a dot), and department boundaries (dashed line). A scale bar indicates distances in both kilometers (0 to 50) and miles (0 to 50).
- Classification:** The map is labeled as "Unclassified" at the bottom left.

505131 3-82

**Page Denied**

Next 1 Page(s) In Document Denied